

Southeastern Conference Men's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Missouri Tigers

Coach Dennis Gates

Men's Media Day Press Conference



DENNIS GATES: Good evening. Definitely excited about this upcoming season. Our journey throughout the NCAA is going to be very, very interesting as it relates to where our conference stands. KenPom, No. 1 conference in the country, nine teams in the AP preseason poll, six Final Four head coaches. I think this is probably the deepest conference or deepest year our conference has been since probably its existence.

I'm excited to be a part of that.

Questions?

Q. When you approached the off-season, what were you looking for as you added a lot of new pieces and talent to this locker room?

DENNIS GATES: Well, what I did understand in terms of the recruiting process, I wanted to have a balance of experience. Therefore, we were able to recruit top 10 portal class. Throughout that year, we were able to close out on some commitments and signees of our high school class, which is ranked top 4 in the country, top 3 in the country, and those relationships started when I first got hired.

For me it was making sure we had unbelievable talent, could play in different styles, but also had experience, but player development standpoint wanted to return guys that could help us and, more importantly, development.

Q. You've got quite a few freshmen and quite a few transfers coming in. What are some of the differences when you're coaching your system and the X's and O's between a freshman who's hearing things for the first time and a transfer you might have to reprogram the way they think or the way they instinctually go on the court?

DENNIS GATES: That's a great question, but I would say this as it relates to your team, no one stays the same. So even our returners have to have that same care as it relates to where their dreams, where they are and where their aspirations are aligning with what's moving forward because it's more popular to sometimes be in the portal, but more importantly, our guys we wanted to galvanize and make sure that there was a balance.

I reset our entire staff, our entire program each season to make sure that we are moving in the right direction. You never know what twists and turns may come your way or whatever obstacles, but we want to prepare the best way possible, and we've done that, and we'll continue to do it.

But I'm excited about our guys, meaning the first-year guys that's in our program. I see how they've been able to adapt to our institution, to our community, and our entire community has accepted those guys with open arms, and these guys are comfortable. Some come from different backgrounds, different states, but also different programs.

And I'll say this: The portal guys that we did sign, we made sure that they've come from some great respectable coaches, and that's where I wanted to kind of identify earlier to make sure that that took place also.

Q. You kind of did the center swap with South Carolina in the off-season. What kind of player is South Carolina getting with Jordan Butler, and how has Josh Gray settled in with Missouri?

DENNIS GATES: Well, that was the first in-season trade. We traded Jordan Butler for Josh Gray, or at least it seemed that way. Jordan Butler is an unbelievable kid. They have a tremendous character, his family, unbelievable people. But he's very talented.

Now, when you look at the two, one was 18, another is 22. You look at that, they're in different phases of their life, different experiences. Josh Gray I'm excited to have. Obviously he's experienced in the SEC obviously having played at LSU as well as South Carolina. He's been a part of wins and some great programs with great coaches.

I'm excited about what I've seen from Josh Gray. Josh Gray is a tremendous personality, tremendous young man. He gives us physical strength in the low post, obviously. Rebounds per minute and rebounding percentage, there was a season where he was tops in the country in that category, whichever season that was. I think it was either his sophomore or even his junior year where he accomplished that.

But he's just an unbelievable young man, great leader in our community, and we're excited and thankful that he chose Missouri.

Q. You've got a player from Little Rock Central, Annor Boateng. Why was he an important recruit to you? How is he doing? I know you've got some good older players. How does he fit into the picture for this season?

DENNIS GATES: I'm excited about Annor Boateng, Annor Boateng from Little Rock, Arkansas, two-time Gatorade Player of the Year. But what I'm looking at is he has a tremendous background, a young man that is a 4.0 student, young man who played in the band, plays the saxophone. His talents off the court is tremendous.

Now, when you look at him as a basketball player, he's a tremendous young man, multitalented, straight-line driver, strong, physical, also a kid that can get his own shot. His athleticism in this conference is very important. I look for him to make an impact.

Now, you never know. Practice is one thing, a game is another. As we've had one-and-dones in my coaching career or two-and-dones, three-and-dones or guys that have waited and became four-year players, we don't know until we get into games where Annor is, but from what I see he's one of the most talented guys that I've coached as a freshman, and I'm excited that he chose Missouri.

Q. Obviously with the successes that you guys have had in year one versus the struggles you had in year two, how do you balance that to kind of find -- re-find the successes of year one, and is there any change to the approach as you go into your third year?

DENNIS GATES: Well, I'll say this: Life happens in seasons, and in real life you can't start back at zero. That's the unique part about basketball or college sports. We're 0-0, just like everyone else. It's unfortunate how we got there because when you lose five rotational guys in a season over 111 games, your hands are tied behind your back.

But what I'm thankful for is our fans, and the last three

games we were at 10,000 fans, 11,000, and close to 12,000. It lets you know what's going on in Missouri, what's going on in our arena and the passion with which our players are playing.

We were in every game that we pretty much had the majority of them. There were some games that got away from us, but I'm thankful for the guys that's returning in our program. I'm thankful for our fans who supported us.

But I'm also thankful for what it teaches us. Most of our teachings, and you guys included, comes from not when you've stood on top but when your back was against the wall.

I'm excited to see where we are this season. Not saying that it'll be easy, but it's a new season, it's a new journey, and we're able to reset it. So I'm thankful about moving forward, and that's where my lens is, is moving forward. It's not backwards at all.

Q. Commissioner Sankey mentioned Leonard Hamilton, ACC media days, Coach Ham was talking about how back in 2020 when he was marching with players in the streets, there weren't a lot of coaches that looked like him in the ACC, and now there's seven. There's three in the SEC. How much progress have you seen on that front, African-American head coaches in your profession? And then can you use a year like last year to kind of -- and the adversity of being an African-American in the profession to kind of move forward as the program, too?

DENNIS GATES: Well, I stand on the shoulders -- that's a good question, good topic to talk about. We can stand here all day depending on how much time you guys have. I stand on the shoulders of great people. I chose to go from Florida State to Cleveland State because John McLendon was the first Black coach in college basketball, got an opportunity at Cleveland State University.

I heard those stories from Leonard Hamilton, who I chose to work for by way of just people, networking. And obviously one of my mentors is George Raveling, as well, who stood on the stage, stood on the podium during Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech.

There are several qualified, over-qualified assistant coaches who can't get an opportunity, and I say that with respect, over-qualified. If they're able to recruit high-level players, if they're able to be assistants who are on the sides, left or right, and their coaches are Hall-of-Famers, they deserve a chance, deserve an opportunity.

I'm just thankful that Leonard Hamilton put his arms around

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me how he did and put me in position to learn on his watch, learn the hard way, learn through failure. And he never took those responsibilities from me. He taught me. He allowed his doors to be open. He shared stories.

One of the greatest stories he showed me or told me was not when he was Big East Coach of the Year, not when he was associate coach for Joe B. Hall at Kentucky, but when he was at Miami and he went 0-17 in conference.

That was one of the greatest stories. I didn't know back then why he would share it. All those trophies, all those rings he would share the story every single month or every two months of how he struggled in certain situations, how he was able to go from Kentucky to Oklahoma State and leave Eddie Sutton a Sweet 16 team, how he was able to go to Miami and by the time he left, Miami was independent, went into the Big East, he was Coach of the Year, how he was able to build Florida State, which is one of the reasons I was there with him.

So what we have to reconnect with is the journey. We have to be able to share these stories. Young coaches need opportunities, not just coaches that look like me. There's other races, other backgrounds, as well, that may not get opportunities, but I can tell you this: That doesn't stop them from living their journeys or coaching because they coach with passion.

I just wish they had opportunities and the lens was a little bit wider and give them the same shot that I've gotten as an assistant under Leonard Hamilton, head coach at Cleveland State University, and now here at Missouri.

I'm thankful for my path. My door is always open to these same coaches to share what was shared to me by those coaches that came before me. If you're out there listening, you're a young coach who's looking for an opportunity, give me a call. I will try my best to have conversation, but I will try my best to give you time.

Q. Mark Mitchell comes in with a wealth of experience from Duke. What kind of player is Missouri getting with him as a person and as a player?

DENNIS GATES: Well, Mark Mitchell isn't just coming from Duke, he's coming back home. When I look at it from that perspective, you have a kid that had to take that journey. That's what makes him who he is now. Just because kids are in the transfer portal doesn't mean they failed at all. Mark Mitchell was a McDonald's All-American, he went to Duke. This is probably my third Duke transfer I've been able to coach, one at Nevada, one at Cal Berkeley, and now here with Mark Mitchell.

Ultimately Mark Mitchell comes back home to a place where he's comfortable, close near his family but also where his roots are. I'm thankful for the opportunity he chose not only Missouri but me as a head coach. It was one of those things where Mark Mitchell from a versatility standpoint, you look at where he is but also how much he's grown from the time he moved on campus in June, and obviously his impact in our community. He's already one of the fan favorites. He's an unbelievable teammate, hard worker, passionate about the game and plays the game the right way.

I'm excited about what he also is about to do, and we'll see once the games start, but Mark Mitchell is a class act, and I thank him for believing in us.

Q. Speaking on -- you mentioned returners previously. Just talking about Tamar Bates, where have you seen him grow the most in the off-season, and what kind of steps do you want to see him make as that lead return man?

DENNIS GATES: Yeah, you look at Caleb Grill, a returner. You look at Trent Pierce, a returner. You look at Ant Robinson, a returner, Tamar Bates is a returner, Aidan Shaw is a returner. All those guys have gotten better. And by maturation, they've improved a lot on their weaknesses. They don't shy away from confrontation as it relates to seeing themselves in a negative while being coached, and they receive the information like a sponge. So I appreciate how they allow us to coach them in plain sight.

Tamar Bates has grown. He's the last player in college basketball playing with a 40, 50, 90, a 180. If he made two threes, he would have been a 180 player. Now, the only one in the country. Two threes away from it. He had to take those risks and maybe took shots he normally wouldn't take just because we were not at 100 percent.

So now look at how he had to play outside of his personality and outside of the chances that he took, but he risked it all for us. He plays both ends. His wingspan is tremendous. He is a leader for us.

I am not surprised where his development has gone because he's another kid that has come home. He's another kid that has come back to Missouri before he ended up playing in the Big Ten. I'm thankful for the work he puts in behind the scenes. I'm thankful for his parents, Ms. Bates, Dr. Bates. I'm thankful for his siblings because they do nothing but support him. And obviously he was one of the most important recruiters as it relates to Mark Mitchell because they've played AAU together as young kids.

Q. Dennis, I think we've asked most every coach about John Calipari going to Arkansas. I don't know if you know Cal very well. You obviously played him at Kentucky, and you've faced Arkansas. How big a surprise was that in the coaching community that Cal would leave Kentucky for Arkansas? And just wonder what your thoughts are on that.

DENNIS GATES: I'll look at it like this, and I'll put everything in seasons, journeys, things like that. He's at a different season in his life, and he made a decision, and I'm sure he didn't make that decision on his own. I'm sure he consulted with his family, with his wife, because as coaches we're absent from our home and we have that support system.

The one thing I look at is what season he is in his life and what else there was out there, and that's a challenge for him. I think he will be successful, no different than he's been successful every step of the way.

He needed a change in his eyes. I can't speak directly toward it, but he seems happy when I see him, just as happy as he was when he was at the former places, at Kentucky and even at Memphis, even at UMass.

But he's still going to recruit at a high level. He's still going to compete at the high level. He's still going to galvanize the crowd and make great memories. That's what this conference is about, creating great memories together and against each other.

I just hope we don't beat each other too much, meaning beat up each other too much in this season because we have 16 unbelievable teams, great coaches, and I would love to see no different than we see in this AP poll that was released, not just nine teams but what if about 12 teams get into the NCAA Tournament from the SEC.

I think it's possible, ultimately, but we all have to stay healthy. We all have to keep competing at a high level, but more importantly we have to keep evolving and getting better, and that's what I'm out to do with our Missouri Tigers.

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